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## Handy to Stone

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# Handy to Some

— by Richard Jaspers

...In '43 the doctor...quite a different doctor than you...gave me an emergency shot in the hips. In less than an hour this shot turned me backward and inside out...I was like a drunk. As soon as I hit the car seat, I had to close my eyes. I couldn't tolerate watching the ground...it was the day Rudy died...yes, my youngest brother...

...I wonder...how many stories is that building next door...it's so tall...

...Hm? Oh, yes...my jaws go stiff. My teeth were set, and I could scarcely talk. This shot was supposed to relax my nerves. They were relaxed all right. My tongue was stiff. I yawned over and over until my mouth got tired. Saliva began to run from my lips, and at night I had to pad my pillow. Now there's a nerve or a muscle that is bothering at the sound of a noise, or at the end of a long day. I lose control of my lips, and my tongue pulls to one side. That shot was either wrong or it was too severe. I think it was a masculine hormone shot, don't you? ...Well, of course, it was fifteen years ago. I was exactly fifty then...

...That building is so tall...

...Now you're really taxing my memory...let's see...I think I was a pretty girl. Mounds of dark braids wound around my head. My broad German nose was small and pert. "Dark eyes," my father would say...

...Not much to say about him. When Fritz was small, long before he left Germany, he had brain fever and was laid out to be buried, and, for some reason was discovered to be alive.

...Oh, he was handy, sort of, with the cutting and smoking of meat, the rendering of lard, and the making of liverwurst, but...I can't help laughing...he couldn't milk a single cow in the county to save his soul. He did it the old way...the wrong way...

...Why he sat **behind** the cow, that's how! Once he nearly lost all of his teeth! But the joke was really on us, because we all learned to milk the wrong way. We learned a lot of things

wrong... Driving them cattle to and from the pasture was our responsibility, Rudy's and mine. I didn't want to do it the first time...

... "Tilde Roderick!" Fritz shouted. He called all of his six sons by their full names when he wanted, really wanted, something. Guess I was no different to him. Taking my little hand in his ugly red one, he said...in a terrible accent... "Tilde, I vahnt you to help Rudy bring in dem cattle." I jerked my hand away, shaking my head. Again I felt the flaky rawness of that hand swallow mine. "Now ged on out der' an' run dem cattle in," he said, throwing me to the ground. It seemed so natural then... I never took his hand again...yet it was too late. Already had it, didn't I? I remember, too...my hands seemed to get bigger...

...Well, for one, Fritz always insisted on giving a big long German prayer at dinner. One time it was so funny, hearing all that jibberish come out of his mouth, I laughed. In the big middle of the prayer, without missing a **Gott** or a **himmel**, he grabbed my hand and cracked it hard with a big silver spoon, the one used for dishing up potatoes. Like I said, my hand immediately seemed to puff up and get bigger...

...What? Sure it was hard work! If a calf got away, Rudy and I had to stake it out and bring it back. Sometimes, as the calves grew stronger, they'd drag us. We hung on. Didn't know any better. It was our responsibility, and Fritz had warned us...

...Yes, well, a little heffer did get away from me one time, and Fritz chased it down with his horse, Bap. When he finally got it, he made me take it all the way home with my hands tied around its smelly little neck. You can imagine...

...I can't help scratching, doctor, it itches. Hm, to think it happened a month ago already. My hand hung by...now what'd **that** doctor say... "by mere ganglia?" Made it sound so pretty...nicer 'n these big black sti-

ches...this festering flesh. My wrist is so stiff, doctor...the tendons didn't heal right, I know they didn't...

...Oh, yes, **every** day. We had to drive them cattle south about a half mile and pump a wooden trough full of water. Later, we moved three quarters of a mile south and over one mile west. We used a long black snake whip on their backs, which I know was cruel, but we were untrained kids, sometimes hungry, sick and tired...very tired after pumping water until the fingers on my hands became hard and unfit for a woman's dainty work, and muscles on my neck got large and ugly like those of an ox...oh, yes, it's true...look at 'em! Anyway, my large bony elbows would pump more. I'd grab the handle and jump up and down until my back played out and my ankle broke down. You know, I can't see modern kids, like my grandnephew Nicky, doing this, but the queer thing is we never complained!

...Yes...Nicky is the one one who found me. A darling boy, just like his grandpa, my departed Rudy Senior. Rudy Junior, Nicky's father, was building the pretty new house for me in town, and Nicky came in right after... Such a child! He ran to the door, for they were outside, Rudy and his wife, and all my nieces and nephews. It was...one of my quiet times...I'd only nod and grunt for weeks at a time...don't know why...no matter. I sat in my wheelchair, such a dolt I was for breaking my hip the month before that. I'd been helping to build the new house and fell over a board!

...Got plumb away from the subject, didn't I? My...my hand was dripping, hanging by mere ganglia, and Nicky yelled out the door, "Aunt Tilde threw up her grape juice all over the place!" **Gott**...the blood was so dark...Nicky's dangfool statement makes some sense to me now. Anyhow, I could hear Rudy Junior shout from outside, quite faintly really, "Good, now maybe she'll talk to me."

As I said, it was one of my quiet times...

...I was always afraid...I remember one time while we were still driving cattle, quite a scare came to us. We'd heard there was a mountain lion in the vicinity. It frightened me terribly. So sure enough, the devil had his fun with me. Rudy and I were as far as the broken-down bridge at Miss Lila's orchard when we saw something moving in the trees, and, of course, not being able to see plainly and afraid to move closer, we turned back home. The farther we got, the more scared we became. The lion was after us!

...I'm coming to that. Later, Helmut, our oldest brother, went to the grove, and it's so amusing now that I think of it...Helmut found a lost bull in the grove. Naturally, if we hadn't known of the lion story, we wouldn't have run away...

...How many stories 'd you say that building is? Twelve! My, my, my... Yes, I remember bolstering myself. Had to keep them cattle going. I'd say, "Now I'm one foot from the top of the hill..." I usually began to mark the distance when I was getting tired. Had I had good health, a sound mind **and** body, I could've made part of it enjoyable... In fact, I did try. I kept a diary of sorts, writing down every little thing, good and bad, that happened. Somehow I had to keep the two separate in my mind, and scribbling helped. It even went so far as...well, when I was eighteen or nineteen, I wanted to write a real book. It was to be my secret way of telling the world how dreadful Fritz was towards me...and how beautiful things were, too, of course. There was so much beauty to write of, and no one noticed it but me. Oh, Rudy saw it. He was especially sensitive, but even he didn't quite see it the way I did.

...Well, for example, spun across the road on an early June morning were the finest of spider webs, big things, twinkling with dew which spattered the wildflowers under our feet. Now Rudy walked right through it all, but not me! I crawled under the

large webs, looking at the dewey jewels, wishing I could put one of them in a fine gold ring...

...Lordy, no! I've since heard a few good jokes about people who thought they ought to write...but my feelings were no joke. I think the book was an attempt to wake up and see what was really wrong with "my world," the most rotten deal one could ever get. The tragic thing was that I forgot about the book for years and didn't wake up until I was about fifty, the year Rudy Senior died and...I got that terrible shot in the hips. Only then did I see the truth...

...The truth, you want the truth! I...I should have been a man! I **can't** leave these stiches alone. I hate these hands...I still want to get rid of 'em. They never pleased Fritz! Never were good for anything! Never did he take an interest in my crocheting, and I wasn't half bad. Really. But...now maybe...I see where I was wedged in...neither did he like my attempts at farming. Even after I learned from a neighbor how to milk a cow properly, he'd lift that snide nose of his to the sky and spit! "Dumpkiff," he'd say...I was no good...as a boy or a girl.

...Please, steady my wheelchair, I can't stop shaking. No! Not my hands...the chair, the chair!

...Mean? Yes...the old goat...sent every last stupid brother of mine to college, but **Herr Gott im Himmel**, I was the smartest! I was the only valedictorian in that family! And...what did I **get**? Sorry...my voice always does that when I'm excited...croaks like an old cow stuck in the mud...D'you have a Kleenex?

...Yes...yes...yes...I guess I should have been a man. Got the worst parts, my father's big Roderick hands, instead of Mother's dainty ones. His big German nose...I was beautiful, I know I was, but no one ever saw it except me...even I couldn't see it after awhile. All I saw were those big hands attached to my little body. They **had** been small when I was small, but...with every pump of water, every crack of that whip, with every squeezed udder...

every fencepost nailed, the joints became more prominent, the hands became wider...and they hung from my little frame exactly like the ones which hung from my father's...

...Yes, funny, isn't it? It all came to me that morning, sitting in that wheelchair, during one of my quiet times. I'd kept it inside of me, though how, I don't know. I suppose it was the photos which jarred me. Rudy Junior had put a large box of snapshots next to me, hoping to cheer me up, get me to talking again. I hadn't looked at 'em in years! He brought the pictures in from the farm, into my unfinished house in town. The floors were dusty from sanding. Sawhorses were still propped up. I...I was between two lives, and somehow I'd had enough of **that**, so I sat and chewed on it awhile...I was ever so quiet...

...Yes, as I said, it was the boy Nicky who found me. Came in and out a dozen times that morning, jabbering to his crazy Aunt Tilde as if nothing in the world was wrong with her. He...he was enchanted with the photos, especially the one of old Fritz standing on the deck of the ship...before he was thrown into steerage where he belonged. Stupid man with the fevered brain believed he's paid for First Class! There he stood in sepia, his large hand gripping the rail of that ship...my large hand gripping the arm of that wheelchair. Nicky skipped out the door, yelling for his daddy to take a look at funny old Fritz...

...I don't know...I just reached down and took the buzz saw...I could only think of those big German hands my father'd given me — and that was all he ever gave me — and I had to get rid of 'em. Of course, I only got so far as the one. Then Nicky came in and found the blood. I'll never know why he didn't see my hand nearly cut off. Anyway, when he went to the front door and spoke of grape juice...funny, I sort of believed it myself. He came back to me, said he was sorry I'd thrown up, and kissed me on the cheek! I thanked him. I was in what they call shock, but I did thank him, I know I did...